

DYSFUNCTION RAGES ON THE PLAINS

HUMAN RACE AND WRIGHT STATE PRODUCE MUST-SEE 'AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY'

By Russell Florence, Jr.

Since the perfect family doesn't exist, it's never a surprise, no matter how uncomfortable or unnerving, to discover that deception, hate, jealousy and regret can live and fester under the same roof of people who say they love each other. Secrets and lies linger for years in order to avoid destructive repercussions. Children are caught in the middle of parental squabbles beyond their control. Marriages disintegrate from the sting of infidelity. Reconciliation is possible, but hope can seem futile to a household in shambles.

In the three-act contemporary masterpiece *August: Osage County*, the recipient of the 2008 Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize that has received an impressive regional premiere at Wright State University courtesy of the Human Race Theatre Company and Wright State, playwright Tracy Letts (*Bug*, *Superior Donuts*) authentically constructs, in the vein of Edward Albee, James Goldman, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and August Wilson, one of the most fractured, dysfunctional and mesmerizing families ever fathomed. The Weston clan that dwells near Pawhuska, Oklahoma is on the verge of collapse having been dealt a huge, life-altering blow. Beverly, the patriarch, noted author and genuinely amiable soul with a penchant for the profound, has vanished for reasons unknown. Dissecting the mystery surrounding his disappearance drives this dark comedy, but the meticulously structured, inherently compelling action, which contains the kind of juicy, jaw-dropping twists that have been fodder for soap opera cliffhangers for decades, is propelled to brutally honest heights as the Westons go to war among themselves.

Directors Marsha Hanna and Scott Stoney (who supplies great sensitivity as Beverly in the low-key yet pivotal prologue) have commendably executed this sizable undertaking for both theater companies. Despite the necessity for age-appropriate casting that this production takes liberties with due to its collaborative nature, the relationships established are entirely credible, which is paramount. The six students are not diminished or seem inept alongside the seven professional actors, and the engaging cohesiveness that arises is a testament to each company's artistic integrity.

Susanne Marley is an intimidating and unpredictable cyclone of anger, cruelty, lunacy and torment as Violet, the all-knowing, verbally abusive, pill-popping matriarch coping

with mouth cancer and the responsibility of carrying the weight of the Westons on her incompetent shoulders. The marvelous Marley understudied Tony winner Deanna Dunagan in the sensational Broadway production, and her exceptional astuteness and maddening complexity is a joy to behold. She provides a brilliantly methodical performance, from her hurriedly frazzled staircase descents to the tenderness displayed in Act 3 that finally reveals Violet's motherly warmth. Marley particularly shines in the humorous and volatile Act 2 dinner scene that serves as the hallmark of the play and wonderfully builds to a thrilling climax. Unafraid to speak her mind as usual, Violet bluntly slings insults at her daughters and their significant others under the hurtful guise of "truth-telling."

As Barbara Fordham, Violet's menopausal eldest daughter who is not as bulletproof as she would appear to be, the dynamic Kristie Berger radiates with multifaceted panache. Berger, so memorable in the 2003 Race production of *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*, beautifully unravels, with captivating depth and vulnerability, multiple layers throughout Barbara's emotionally frustrated journey, which involves testy battles with her philandering husband Bill (Bill Simmons) and pot-smoking teenage daughter Jean (an appealingly rebellious Chelsey Cavender) not to mention a useful if fleeting reign as head of household.

Strong, colorful, fully realized performances extend to the delightfully earthy Madeleine Casto as Violet's overbearing sister Mattie Fae Aiken, a revelatory Jason David Collins as Charlie Aiken, a nicely understated Gregory R. Mallios as awkward loser Little Charles Aiken, Rainbow Dickerson as housekeeper Johnna Monevata, the quietly observing outsider on the inside, Kelsey Hopkins as Violet's introverted middle daughter Ivy, head over heels in a forbidden romance, Alex Sunderhaus in a breakthrough portrayal of Violet's flighty younger daughter Karen, Brian Evans as Karen's shady fiance Steve Heidebrecht, and Daniel C. Britt as Sheriff Deon Gilbeau.

Additionally, Pam Knauert Lavarney's terrifically detailed, three-story set ranks among her finest designs and John Rensel's light-



L to R: Kristie Berger, Madeleine Casto and Susanne Marley in *August: Osage County*

Photo by Scott J. Kimmins

ing excellently reflects the varying moods within the material. The contributions of costumer David M. Covach and properties masters John Lavarney and Heather Powell are also noteworthy.

In Act 3, after sparks fly from a moment shared between Steve and Jean, Karen reminds an enraged Barbara that everything in life is not always cut and dry:

Karen: I'm not defending him. He's not perfect. Just like all the rest of us, down here in the muck. I'm no angel myself. I've done some things I'm not proud of. Things you'll never know about. Know what? I may even have to do some things I'm not proud of *again*. 'Cause sometimes life puts you in a corner that way. And I am a human being, after all.

Karen's statements define Letts' potent, occasionally poetic saga, which also addresses political correctness, societal entitlement and frank opinions on womanhood. The people we care about make mistakes and can hurt us very deeply, but we must find a way to forgive and move on. Your family might not be as diabolical or tumultuous as the Westons, but it's a safe bet you'll find something relatable in their experiences. *August: Osage County* is simply a fascinating epic you'll never forget.

August: Osage County continues through October 10 in the Festival Playhouse of the Creative Arts Center at Wright State, 3640 Col. Glenn Hwy., Fairborn. The play contains adult language and mature themes, and is performed in 3 hours and 30 minutes including two intermissions. Performances will be held Sept. 29, Oct. 5 and Oct. 6 at 7 p.m.; Sept. 30, Oct. 1, Oct. 2, Oct. 7, Oct. 8 and Oct. 9 at 7:30 p.m.; and Oct. 2, Oct. 3 and Oct. 10 at 2 p.m. A post-show talkback featuring Marsha Hanna and Scott Stoney will be held following the Oct. 3 performance. All tickets are \$21. For tickets or more information, call the WSU box office at (937) 775-2500 or visit www.HumanRaceTheatre.org

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